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ABSTRACT

Organization and financing have enabled the religious right to bring their textbook censorship campaign into the U.S. federal court system. Denouncing secular humanism, these groups have initiated steps to obtain federal funding for private religious schools. Over the last 100 years public school textbooks have been revised to reflect various public criticisms, and this has resulted in changes in the treatment of history, literature, and religion in the classroom. The Scopes Trial of 1925 was one of the many forces that shaped textbook content. The market has responded to pressures from activist groups, and the result has been the production of textbooks for public schools that are written and designed to comply with perceived areas of future controversy. To prepare for censorship conflicts parents, educators, and legislators need to study the published procedures for textbook selection, course content design, and the establishment of educational goals. (NL)

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TEXTBOOK CENSORSHIP AND THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT: RISE OR DECLINE?

by

Franklin Parker

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Textbook Censorship and the Religious Right: Rise or Decline?

By Franklin Parker

What the Religious Right Wants

Religious Right fundamentalists, called the "fourth most powerful political force in America," after the two major political parties and organized labor, reached a high point in textbook censorship in Tennessee and Alabama in 1986. Then in 1987 the same fundamentalists lost ground when federal appeals courts overturned the censorship rulings and released the Tennessee and Alabama textbooks. (1)

High drama is unfolding in this reversal of the Tennessee and Alabama textbook cases. With the 1987 Jim and Tammie Bakker PTL Club scandal, disillusion of religious contributors, weakened support from lameduck President Ronald Reagan, and Jerry Falwell's withdrawal from the Moral Majority, some see a possible decline of the Religious Right's grand coalition to create an American theocracy. Funded by millions of dollars solicited by television evangelists and backed by President Ronald Reagan, whom they helped elect, the Religious Right has tried since the mid 1970s to turn America from modern sin to a nostalgic America that never was. The Religious Right wants to reverse rising crime, drug abuse, abortion, gay rights, women's lib, gun control, permissiveness, high divorce rate, reverse discrimination, surrender of the Panama Canal, and other aspects of changing America. Educationally, fundamentalists want to restore school prayer, purify textbooks, create Christian schools, reinstate patriotism, have Congress pass tuition tax credit to support private religious schools, and to require creation science teaching based on Genesis. Like the weakened President Reagan, the evangelical Right is reeling from 1987 defeats, yet is still determined to establish a Christian America. (2)

Tennessee Case

In Hawkins County, East Tennessee, eleven fundamentalist families objected to a 1983 Holt, Rinehart & Winston reading series for grades 1-8. They charged that the books contain pacifist, magical, feminist, and anti-Christian themes. The parents asked for an alternative class using religiously acceptable books. Tennessee authorities said that a separate class for religious objectors would violate the U.S. Constitution. On October 24, 1986, fundamentalist-minded Federal District Judge Thomas G. Hull held that Hawkins County schools had violated the families' First Amendment rights by not giving the children an alternative except to read the books or leave school. He ordered the school system to permit the parents to teach reading to their children at home, with school officials grading the children by standardized tests. On textbooks Judge Hull said: "They've almost whitewashed religion out of the schools. They've done it to try to satisfy everybody. They would write anything as long as they could sell it." On evolution and creation, he said: "I think that either one could be taught; you can teach [creationism], but you can't preach it." (3)

Mobile, Alabama, Case

In Mobile, Alabama, on March 4, 1987, another fundamentalist-minded Federal District Judge W. Brevard Hand granted 624 fundamentalists' request that 44 elementary and secondary textbooks be removed from Alabama public schools because they advocated a humanistic "religion" and omitted Christian religious aspects of American life. Judge Hand wrote, "For purposes of the First Amendment, secular humanism is a religious belief system." Fundamentalists were jubilant: "This is exactly what we were asking for." "Humanism is out of the closet for the first time," said the executive secretary of Pat Robertson's National Legal Fund. (4)

Countercharge: People for the American Way

John H. Buchanan, chairman of People for the American Way (PAW), a civil liberties organization which monitors censorship, said Judge Hand's ruling was "judicial bookburning and nothing less." Buchanan explained,

"Secular humanism is really a straw man created by religious right leaders like Pat Robertson." (5)

Alabama Silent Prayer Law

Mobile's textbook censorship grew out of Alabama's earlier adoption of silent prayer in schools. When the law was challenged, as he knew it would be, Judge Hand said that if silent prayer was reversed by a higher court he would reopen the case by supporting fundamentalists' charge that secular humanism was being taught as a religion in public schools. Silent prayer was, in fact, overturned by a higher court, and its unconstitutionality was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1985. Judge Hand then banned the 44 textbooks throughout Alabama. When silent prayer was challenged, he wrote:

> If this Court is compelled to purge 'God is great, God is good, we thank Him for our daily food' from the classroom, then this court must also purge from the classroom those things that serve to teach that salvation is through one's self rather than through a deity. (6)

Evangelist Pat Robertson pointed out why winning the Alabama textbook case was important:

> In a lawsuit that was a continuation of the Alabama prayer case...we said, 'You are teaching humanism in the schools of Alabama,' and we sued the governor and we sued the school board....Alabama is a landmark move for religious freedom for Christian people and we are going to see that followed up in state after state, because we can challenge those people in every single state [where] they're doing it. (7)

Fundamentalists' Ultimate Aim

> PAW sees Federal Judge Hand's censorship in Alabama as:
>
> ...the most ambitious example to date of the Far Right's effort to censor textbooks and inject sectarian beliefs into public school curriculum....Tennessee and Alabama reflect national efforts by Far Right organizations to reshape public education. (8)

Fundamentalists' ultimate aim was voiced by leading religious right lawyer Michael Farris: "We may even see alternatives to public schools constitutionally mandated," meaning that religious schools might someday soon be state and federally recognized as equal with and eventual replacements for public schools. Moral Majority founder Jerry Falwell said the same thing:

> I hope in the next ten years...we will have more Christian day schools than...public schools. I hope I live to see the day when, as in the early days of our country, we don't have any public schools. The churches will have taken them over again and Christians will be running them. What a happy day that will be! (9)

Increased Censorship

Book censorship incidents increased 35% in 1985-86 over the year before and 117% over PAW's first survey in 1981-82. PAW finds fundamentalists more active, better organized, more emboldened, and more sophisticated in their censorship attacks; finds them increasingly intimidating school boards; and finds their harassment increasingly frightening publishers into removing controversial materials from textbooks, eliminating the contribution of religion, and watering down textbooks. These attacks come at a time of a projected large teacher shortage; when U.S. students' writing and critical thinking skills are said to be low; when students from other industrial nations are said to outscore ours in science and math; and when national consensus is to upgrade schools, as recommended in 1980s school reform reports.

Key Questions

Key questions to ask are: What is secular humanism? Why have fundamentalists seized upon that term? Why do they call it a religion? Is secular humanism, as PAW believes, a subterfuge term contrived to smear public schools as atheistic? Why have publishers been frightened to reduce, if not eliminate, the role religion has played in American history? Why have fundamentalist attacks become so organized, determined, and adamant? What faults in American society and schools worry fundamentalists? In short, what lies behind textbook censorship?

What is Secular Humanism?

"Secular" means non-religious and "humanism" refers to literature, philosophy, art, and so on, as distinct from the sciences. "Secular humanism" as a pejorative term was used significantly in a 1982 fundamentalist crusade against sex education in a Corvallis, Oregon, high school. Fundamentalist parent Susan Simonson, mother of seven, complained that the high school sex education course was a "how-to class instead of a not-to class." She saw a fundamentalist church film that warned against an anti-religion known as "secular humanism." Investigating further, she wrote to Mel and Norma Gabler, Longview, Texas, fundamentalist textbook reviewers with nationwide mailings. The Gablers sent her material describing "secular humanism" as:

> Faith in man instead of faith in God....[It] promotes situation ethics; evolution; sexual freedom, including sex education courses; and internationalism....'Humanism' centers on 'self' because it recognizes no higher being to which man is responsible. Thus there is much emphasis in public education on each child having a 'positive self concept.' ...This eliminates coming to Christ for forgiveness of sin. It eliminates the Christian attributes of meekness and humility. (10)

Other Secular Humanist Opponents

> A Moral Majority source describes secular humanisn as:
> An incorrect view of mankind, placing the created at the center of all things rather than the creator. From such a presupposition flow inevitable moral and ethical consequences that...have proved detrimental to the best interests of the human race. (11)

Chief anti-secular humanist is Tim LaHaye, San Diego, California, minister recruited by Jerry Falwell for the Moral Majority. In his widely distributed book, THE BATTLE FOR THE MIND, LaHaye says that 275,000 committed humanists have infiltrated and taken control of the U.S. Government, the courts, the media, the schools, and countless national organizations. He writes:

> We are being controlled by a small but very influential cadre of committed humanists who are determined to turn traditionally moral-minded America into an amoral, humanist country. Oh, they don't call it humanism. They label it DEMOCRACY, but they mean humanism in all its atheistic, amoral depravity. (12)

Other anti-secular humanists include Beverly LaHaye's Concerned Women for America (she is The Reverend Tim LaHaye's wife), Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum, Lottie Beth Hobbs's Pro-Family Forum, and others. A fundamentalist pamphlet, WEEP FOR YOUR CHILDREN, claims:

> Our children become involved in alcohol, drugs, sex, and sex perversions, even in satanism, because of the lack of firm religious background--and the promotion of Humanists in our schools, our media, and other places. (13)

Secular Humanism as a Conspiracy

Fundamentalists see a humanist conspiracy in 1933 and 1973 statements published by the American Humanist Association, describing and endorsing the noblest possibilities of human achievement, signed by non-theist intellectuals John Dewey, B. F. Skinner, Sidney Hook, and Isaac Asimov. Fundamentalists also cite an obscure footnote in a 1961 court case listing secular humanism among religions, including Buddhism, which do not subscribe to an actual God. The 1961 Supreme Court case footnote referred to an actual California church that was called "Secular Humanist." On the basis of this passing reference, fundamentalists spin a conspiracy theory claiming that the U.S. Supreme Court has declared secular humanism to be the official religion of the United States, in violation of the First Amendment. (14)

Secular Humanism Used to Defend Censorship

That fundamentalists deliberatley used the alleged evils of secular humanism as a subterfuge in the Alabama textbook and other censorship cases was described in an ATLANTA CONSTITUTION editorial. Judge Hand, it stated, imbued:

this nonsense with legal respectability....Spearheaded by the National Legal Fund (created by television preacher Pat Robertson), the Alabama textbook controversy was born....Worst of all, he has offered temporary encouragement to litigious bookbanning from coast to coast. Their cases ultimately will fail. But until they do, the shadow of legal activity will harass and intimidate countless local school boards. (15)

Role of Religion Ignored?

Evidence shows that textbook publishers have been intimidated to avoid controversy and so have played into the hands of fundamentalists. Wanting to sell textbooks and fearful of offending their critics, publishers have reduced or removed the important role religion played in the origin and progress of the Unites States.

Publishers and Religion

Laidlaw Educational Publishers president, one of whose books Judge Hand censored in Alabama, admitted, "There has not been an appropriate amount of time spent on the role of religion in society." A 1986 report on textbooks criticized a Laidlaw sixth grade social studies book for not mentioning God in discussing Joan of Arc. Other books were criticized for not mentioning that Martin Luther King, Jr., was a Baptist minister. (16)

ASCD Report

A July 1, 1987, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) report called for an end to "the curricular silence on religion" which, it said, has permeated the classroom since the U.S. Supreme Court banned officially sanctioned prayer from public schools a quarter of a century ago. ASCD deplored "bland" textbooks and the schools' "benign neglect" of the role religion has played in shaping American and world history. It asserted that public schools must get over the mistaken notion "that matters of religion are simply too hot to handle." (17)

The report said, "The quest for religious freedom that fueled the establishment of this nation receives scant treatment at best in many textbooks." It added that the books "have even less to say about the

profound part religious belief has played in more recent U.S. history," from the nineteenth century abolitionist and temperance movements to the twentieth century civil rights movement. "An elementary student can come away from a textbook account of the Crusades," for example, believing "that these wars to win the Holy Land for Christendom were little more than exotic shopping expeditions." Nor, it added, are the religious roots mentioned in such recent conflicts as between Iran and Iraq or in disturbances in Lebanon and in Northern Ireland.

Textbooks, the report continued, "contain few, if any, references to Christmas and Easter, or even to Thanksgiving, St. Patrick's Day or Columbus Day, to say nothing of Jewish holidays or those of other religions." It quoted Justice Tom Clark's majority opinion in a 1963 U. S. Supreme Court school prayer case. "One's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion," adding, "the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities." (18)

AFT Report

Five world history textbooks were faulted in a July 29, 1987, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) report. It called for courses and textbooks to focus on the historical struggle for democratic ideals. The five textbooks were called "bland, incomplete, lacking drama, and more interested in skills than in presenting ideas." The report said, "The basic ideas of Judaism and Christianity, which inform every debate over right and wrong and the place of the individual in society, are all but ignored." Said AFT President Albert Shanker, "We are talking about understanding our ideals, about knowing our past--the unfortunate and the evil as well as the good. That is not indoctrination; that is education in the best sense of the word." The AFT issued 1987 guidelines for teaching democratic values in the nation's schools, guidelines endorsed by 150 politicians, educators, and other prominent citizens. (19)

Paul Vitz Report

New York University psychology Professor Paul Vitz's 1986 study also found that textbooks neglected religion and distorted family life by not stressing marriage and full-time parenting as the norm. He found little on patriotism; a neglect of business, labor, and altruism; and found that

prominent contemporary political figures mentioned were almost exclusively "liberal." Observers noted that this exclusion from textbooks of much of the American experience helps explain why federal district judges in Tennessee and Alabama have banned books, agreeing with fundamentalists that textbooks and school curricula are biased against religious convictions. (20)

Diane Ravitch Report

Education historian Diane Ravitch's 1986 report on U.S. public school readers found them deeply disturbing. With the fundamentalists, she objected to their abundance of myth and fantasy, and was concerned about their neglect of classic literature. Late nineteenth century educators and publishers, she said, saw their purpose as transmitting the best literature in the English language to young readers. Modern textbooks, written to satisfy complex readability and vocabulary control formulas, do not include such authors as Nathanial Hawthorne because his language does not fit such formulas. Today's reader, she continued, is "dumbed down" by readability formulas and is "blanded down" to remove anything that might offend interest groups in big states. Thus, the readers strive to be cheerful, patriotic, multiethnic, nonsexist, and noncontroversial. "In this saccharine world, no one suffers unjustly, no one is evil, no one is poor or unemployed, women and minorities are depicted as leaders and achievers in every field." She criticized this unrealistic image of society and praised the nineteenth century McGuffey readers for including such classic writers as Hawthorne, Shakespeare, Tennyson, and others. Poetry, she noted,

> accounted for 30 percent of...19th century readers. Today it is less than 3 percent.... The golden age of the school readers faded in the 1920s, with the introduction of standardized testing. Emphasis shifted from oral reading to silent reading, from teaching appreciation of literature to instructing children in the mechanics of reading [for] speed and efficiency, for timed tests, to answer true-false questions, or to fill in blanks or circle the correct answer.

In the modern utilitarian era, she said, classic elements were dropped in favor of informational material and so-called realistic stories of boys and girls, as in the "Dick and Jane" readers. Some good teachers, Ravitch said,

rebel against basal readers and spend their own money for the best literature of the present and past. "Unless we expose children to the best literature," she said, we will lose them to television. She praised the California Reading Initiative under State Superintendent of Education William Honig as an ambitious effort to bring "real books" back to the classroom. (21)

California Initiative on Better Textbooks

The California Board of Education on July 10, 1987, unanimously required history textbooks to include more facts on religion. The new requirement, part of a broad strategy to revamp the California history and social science curriculum, calls for greater emphasis on the "major religions and ethical traditions throughout history" and the "role of religion in the founding of this country." School Superintendent Honig called the strategy a "landmark" that confronts "head-on the erosion and dilution of the study of history." California's large textbook market will sway the entire publishing industry and its decisions will have national implications. Noting that textbook publishers are charged with deliberately avoiding controversial topics, a California educator held that "history without controversial issues isn't good history." He noted that the new California plan asks publishers to take on such other controversial themes as the history of slavery, world human rights issues, patriotism, and dissent in communist countries. (22)

Why Textbooks Went Wrong

Other reasons for watered down textbooks in religious and academic content were cited by NEW YORK TIMES education writer Fred M. Hechinger. He points out that as college enrollments skyrocketed and new textbook markets expanded, two-year colleges, which grew most rapidly, wanted simpler texts like those written for high schools. Young and inexperienced faculty wanted easy teaching manuals and ready-made tests. As conglomerates gobbled up textbook houses, editors, more often market experts than scholars, sought increased profits from a mass audience. As knowledge expanded, particularly in the sciences, the safest policy seemed to be to leave everything in, including outdated and questionable material. Thus, textbooks inevitably became larger, more expensive, often poorly written, and lightly edited. Hechinger says responsibility for correction

lies with leading faculty to speak out against flawed books and refuse to buy and assign them. (23)

Complaints about publishers' neglect of religion, science, and sound literature are faults publishers now recognize and seem ready to correct. Yet it was fundamentalist attacks which scared off publishers in the first place.

Behind the Fundamentalist Crusade?

Fear of change, fear of crime, drug use, divorce, abortion, AIDS, teenage suicide, and other dislocations of our time make fundamentalists determined to return America to an imagined simpler age of Christian morality. One can go back to fundamentalist reaction against Charles Darwin's ORIGIN OF SPECIES, 1859, which offered evidence that all life evolved gradually over millions of years by natural selection. Disliking Darwinian evolution for casting doubt on divine creation, fundamentalists were also upset by largely German late nineteenth-century Bible scholars' evidence that the Bible was written by mortals at different times and places and included myths and possible forgeries.

Most people accepted Darwinian evolution, science, higher Bible criticism, and secular life problems--and still remained religious and led moral lives. Fundamentalists, however, held an important 1895 Bible conference in Niagara, New York, which affirmed the Christian doctrines of Bible inerrancy, Christ's divinity, virgin birth, absolution for man's sin, resurrection, and second coming. This affirmation, distributed by the millions in 12 pamphlets called THE FUNDAMENTALS, 1910-1915, largely inspired in the 1920s anti-liquor Prohibition laws and anti-evolution teaching laws. Speeches by fundamentalist politician William Jennings Bryan (three-time Democratic candidate for the U.S. Presidency) spurred 37 anti-evolution bills in 20 state legislatures, actually passed in five states, including Tennessee. Most Tennessee legislators felt they had to vote for the anti-evolution bill in March 1925 in order to be re-elected. The Tennessee governor who signed it said, "Nobody believes that it is going to be an active statute." (24)

Who Won the Scopes Trial?

An American Civil Liberties Union test case in Dayton, Tennessee, 1925, pitted fundamentalist William Jennings Bryan against agnostic Chicago lawyer Clarence Darrow. High school science teacher John Thomas Scopes was found guilty of teaching evolution and fined. (25) Laughed at in the press, fundamentalists won the Scopes trial and also won educationally. Frightened publishers downplayed evolution. A study of biology textbooks noted:

> Self censorship exercised by the New York-based publishing industry...shaped the content of high school biology courses for 35 years following the Scopes trial....Publishers and authors feared that a good treatment of evolution meant the loss of the southern market. (26)

Evolution and the Creationists

Reinstatement of evolution in post-Sputnik National Science Foundation (NSF) financed biology textbooks after 1958, provoked the rise of creationism, focus of fundamentalist concern in the 1960s and '70s. Convinced that they could not legally dislodge evolution teaching, creationists demanded equal time for Genesis-based creation science teaching. Believing in Americans' sense of fair play, they saw equal time as a strategy they could win. Equal time was won in California under conservative Governor Ronald Reagan and conservative Superintendent of Instruction Max Rafferty. (27)

Creationists were also encouraged when fundamentalists largely won a 1974-75 Charleston, West Virginia, campaign against alleged dirty textbooks. More encouragement came when Congress stopped NSF's 1975 funding because fundamentalists objected to an NSF-financed sixth-grade social studies course, "Man: A Course of Study," for mentioning in course materials such Eskimo customs as wife swapping, incest, cannibalism, and robbery. (28)

West Virginia Censorship, 1975

Creationists flourished nationally, as did textbook censors, the

Heritage Foundation, the Moral Majority, and others of the fundamentalist right, in widespread press reaction to the West Virginia textbook controversy. One observation about West Virginia textbook censorship in 1975 is applicable today:

> This country is experiencing a religious crusade as fierce as any out of the Middle Ages....Our children are being sacrificed because of the fanatical zeal of our fundamentalist brothers who claim to be hearing the voice of God. People are confused and angry about everything from marijuana to Watergate. Feeling helpless and left out, they are looking for a scapegoat, eager to exorcise all that is evil and foul, cleanse or burn all that is strange and foreign. In this religious war, spiced with overtones of race and class, the books are an accessible target. (29)

Louisiana's Creation Science Law Unconstitutional

By 7-2 vote on June 19, 1987, the U.S. Supreme Court declared unconstitutional Louisiana's 1981 equal time creation science/evolution teaching law. It was a seemingly decisive defeat for fundamentalists' 60-year battle against evolution teaching and their 20-year strategy for substituting Genesis-based creation science. Leading creation science lawyer Wendell R. Bird still believes reversal possible. "With four justices approaching age 80," he said, "the Court won't stay the same forever." (30) A vow of continued creation science effort came from former Louisiana legislator Bill Keith, who originally introduced the bill, carefully worded to camouflage its religious intent. He now publishes Christian books in Texas and heads the Creation Science Legal Defense Fund. (31)

Seventy-two Nobel laureates and 24 science organizations filed court briefs against creationism. A relieved Louisiana high school assistant principal said, "We don't have the money now to be spending on bad science." (32) Harvard biology professor Stephen J. Gould, labelling creation science "a ruse and sham" said, "This victory belongs to the teachers." He warned that "The larger struggle is not over and never will be." (33)

What Educators and the Public Can Do

A PAW pamphlet lists 20 suggestions to prepare for censorship attacks, the key ones being: school systems need a publicized written policy for book and other media selection; known policy for controversial elective and required courses needing parental permission; statements on the school's curriculum, goals, and philosophy of education; along with published procedures for making, receiving, verifying, discussing, and resolving censorship complaints. Educators, parents, and students should be familiar with far-right organizations, including the Gablers, their literature, arguments, and vocabulary--especially use of the pejorative term "secular humanism." Finally, censorship cases are reduced when an aware public and educators work together for quality education. (34) For us all, educators too, the price of liberty is eternal vigilance.

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